

“A WEED IN THE CHURCH”  
MODERN YOUTH MINISTRY PRACTICE AND ITS EFFECT ON  
MAINLINE CHURCH ATTRITION

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## ABSTRACT

A Weed in the Church:  
Modern Youth Ministry Practice and its Effect on Mainline Church Attrition

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It has been widely quoted that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results.<sup>1</sup> While this may be arguably a flawed definition of mental illness, it does give us a framework to ask the question in this paper, namely: is our modern praxis of youth ministry really working? The mainline church has been losing the vast number of congregants in the time period between confirmation<sup>2</sup> and their mid-twenties, yet more and more resources are poured into a youth ministry model that keeps young adults separated from their host congregation. Drawing from the fields of church growth, educational practice, sociology, and theology, this project seeks to demonstrate that the age-segregated model of youth ministry has been a contributing factor in the attrition of the mainline church. Using the work of Malan Nel, Holly Allen, and Christine Ross among others, ample evidence is provided to suggest moving from a traditional youth ministry model to an inclusive intergenerational model of youth ministry returns congregations to sustainability and growth.

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is often attributed to Albert Einstein, Benjamin Franklin, and Mark Twain. However, its first copyrighted appearance is from mystery writer Rita Mae Brown who used it in her novel Sudden Death. "The Definition of Insanity is... | Psychology Today." 27 Jul. 2009, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/in-therapy/200907/the-definition-insanity-is>. Accessed 3 Apr. 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Confirmation is a practice in primarily mainline churches, usually done in the early teen years, that is intended to "confirm" a child's baptism and welcome them into the full faith community.

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## Chapter 1

### A Career Youth Pastor Looks Back

#### Leaving Youth Ministry

I began this project because I was leaving youth ministry. I had given the majority of my career to serving 12-19 year-olds both inside and outside of the church. Now that I found myself well into my 40's, I considered it was time to follow most of my colleagues into broader leadership roles within the church; i.e. it was time to be a real pastor. Some of it, I admit, was financially driven. Youth workers are among the lowest paid on a pastoral staff. A survey published in "Group" magazine, a bimonthly publication for youth workers, found that youth pastors averaged \$37,500 a year as of 2012.<sup>3</sup> Insufficient salary is a major challenge to raising three college-bound boys in the metropolitan area surrounding New York City. However, the aforementioned factor was more significant, finding myself a middle-aged youth pastor. The traditional youth pastor is expected to hang out with kids after school, be "hip" and relevant, do all-night lock-ins, weekend camps, be the guy leading the crazy games at youth group, keep up on all the latest pop-phenomena and technology, do small group discipleship, and in the midst of all of that keep good communication and administration with the adults. While I still felt capable and affirmed in all those things, I could feel the years making it less easy and far less natural-looking. This may not have been cause for concern if it were not for one more

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<sup>3</sup> "The Average Salary of Youth & Children's Pastors - Work - Chron.com." Accessed 24 Jan. 2017. <http://work.chron.com/average-salary-youth-childrens-pastors-11679.html>.

looming reality I could not ignore: my youth ministry was not growing. On the contrary, it was shrinking. This was cause for great concern professionally.

I had been hired with a specific commission, that of helping Wilson Memorial Church in Watchung, NJ survive the onslaught of time. My hire was seen as an “investment” of resources in the youth of this church because this historical church was revealing all the marks of an aging mainline congregation. There were some youth, however their numbers had been shrinking rapidly in the last decade or more, making it clear to the leadership that without an investment in youth, there would be no church in another generation. I put all the years I had as a successful youth minister to the task ahead. I started youth groups, planned weekend retreats, did summer missions, and showed up in the world of kids just as I had been taught; methods that had proved wildly successful in other ministries. The problem was, success was no longer my experience.

I found myself troubled and embarrassed by my own shrinking numbers as the “honeymoon” stage began to wear off. It was not that I struggled with my relationships with students. Quite the contrary, I had great relationships with students and we fully enjoyed our time together. We had great conversations about life and they knew I was there to guide them in some of the more challenging moments of their lives. I took comfort in developing “specialized” programs that drew kids with particular interests. I did walks through NYC that appealed to the adventurous/semi-cosmopolitan, opened the church basement to kids who wanted to have a venue for local indie bands to play, mission trips and opportunities to serve the poor for kids who had a social justice bent (or needed service hours for school), and even a monthly traditional youth group with the local Roman Catholic church for any kids for whom that was still a draw. I had great

relationships with teens and our times together were meaningful. By all accounts, I was a great youth pastor and “great with the kids.” But numbers still continued to shrink. I had been in ministry long enough to see the unsustainable nature of this work. Wilson was still on a steady decline, and I felt that I was just making the slide more palatable because people could say that they had invested in youth, but to no avail.

It may have been this feeling of failure that became my primary cause for seminary. If I had become too old to do this or too removed from the world of youth to be effective, then it was high time I had gotten my Master’s of Divinity (M.Div.) degree - the professional degree for ministers. After all, I was going to need a different avenue for work. However, I could not escape youth ministry as a seminarian. Whether it was the troubling lack of course offerings in youth ministry or the fact that I seemed to have become the “go-to” guy for seminarians whose first assignment was as a youth minister. I loved sitting with people who were struggling with being assigned to lead groups of teenagers but had no idea what they were doing. Assignments and projects I took on allowed me to see a gap in scholarship as it pertained to youth ministry. While there was vast work on how to communicate to teenagers, attract teenagers, inspire teenagers, and help hurting teenagers, there was little study done on the longevity of the congregants who go through youth ministry. This caused me to, in turn, focus an academic eye toward what was happening at Wilson and at countless other mainline churches across the United States. I wanted to know what ingredients had to be present, statistically speaking, for youth to become active and faithful adults. While pursuing my M.Div., I began exploring this question and the findings brought me to this project.

## Initial Observations

Some of the key discoveries I made during this time form the foundational investigation of this thesis:

- 1) Decline of youth participation was not an issue unique to Wilson Memorial Church, but was the shared reality of mainline churches across the board.
- 2) Not only were there attrition issues in youth groups, but there was a growing gap between ages in many of the congregations I investigated.
- 3) Parents of teenagers could reflect on their great youth ministry experience, but admitted that the largest majority of the people they grew up with were no longer committed to their home or similar congregation.
- 4) Parents were highly involved in the lives of their children, providing volunteer hours and leadership in many of the programs in which their child was involved or enrolled.
- 5) Conversely, parent's commitment to church fell lower on the priority list than the other opportunities presented to their child through school, sports, or extracurriculars. This was a new feature in my experience of parent commitment.
- 6) The reliability of teens need to socialize that often fueled youth group participation for decades had been replaced, to a large degree, by digital socialization. In other words, they no longer needed youth group to interact with their peers.
- 7) This digital social space was misunderstood by the established generation



who struggled with the learning that technological advances required, further increasing the communication and social gap between generations.

- 8) Youth commitment was still very active in mission trips and rites of passage such as confirmation.
- 9) Teens knew very few adults and adults knew very few teens. I was seen as the ambassador to both.
- 10) People emerging from youth ministries held a theology most closely related to what has been described as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism coined by Smith and Denton.<sup>4</sup> This is a religious outlook largely defined by believing in a God who wants me to do good and be happy, yet lack the uniqueness of Christian theology or practice.

My research began to center on the praxis of faith formation. Youth ministry is a multi-million dollar industry that has sadly little work done in terms of “Return on Investment” (ROI). In the world of faith, ROI is a tough thing to gauge, but it would seem that there should be a demonstrable level of effectiveness considering all of the curriculum, books, conferences, camps, staffing, music, movies, software, and programs focused directly on the spiritual lives of people 12-18. I began to consider the notion that it is reasonable to gauge the effectiveness of a process by the longevity of participants. In other words, it is admirable to fill a room with youth and give them a great spiritual and social experience, but do statistics show that the students who go through our present youth ministry programming become deeply committed members of our (or a) local faith

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<sup>4</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

community? At present, statistics seem to indicate that the mainline church is failing to sustainably transfer shared faith to the next generation.

This forced a focal point, that of the long term effectiveness of youth ministry. Mike Yaconelli, the founder and first president of Youth Specialties,<sup>5</sup> wrote an article called “The Failure of Youth Ministry” in which this decades-long youth minister reflected on the effectiveness of this methodology. He was not only a practitioner of this method, but one of the major founders. In the article, Yaconelli talks about modern youth ministry as an experiment that has failed to do the job of creating long-term disciples. He writes:

Youth ministry doesn't have any staying power. Young people flock to Christian concerts, cheer Jesus at large events, and work on service projects. Unfortunately, it's not because of Jesus; it's because they're young! The success of youth ministry in this country is an illusion. Very little youth ministry has a lasting impact on students. I believe we're no more effective today reaching young people with the gospel than we've ever been. In spite of all the dazzling super stars of youth ministry, the amazing array of YS products, the thousands of youth ministry training events, nothing much has changed. Following Jesus is hard. Faith is difficult. Discipleship requires a huge investment of time. Most of us don't have the time. Or we chose not to take the time. Or our current models of ministry don't allow us the time. So let's be honest. Youth ministry as an experiment has failed. If we want to see the church survive, we need to rethink youth ministry. What does that mean? I don't have a clue. But my hunch is that if we want to see young people have a faith that lasts, then we have to completely change the way we do youth ministry in America.<sup>6</sup>

A few weeks later, Yaconelli printed was a follow up article that was offered as an apology to youth workers who had reacted strongly to the suggestion that their career and investment of time had been for nothing. Yaconelli felt compelled to point out the “good” of youth ministry:

Maybe the institution of youth ministry is a failure, but it hasn't failed all young people. Maybe techniques and programs don't work very well, but they work for

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<sup>5</sup> "Youth Specialties," accessed 17 Feb. 2017, <https://youthspecialties.com/>.

<sup>6</sup> Mike Yaconelli, “The Failure of Youth Ministry,” *Youthworker Journal* (Feb. 2003).

some. Maybe many of the young people we work with don't make it, but some do. Maybe our programs aren't effective for all, but they are effective for a few. Maybe our programs aren't changing the world, but they are changing some. Maybe most kids disappear, but not all of them do.<sup>7</sup>

This perspective is that youth ministry has meant something, sometimes a big something, in the lives of teenagers is absolutely true and denial of this would derail the argument found in this project. Clearly, the efforts of youth leaders around the country have introduced teens to Christianity and have encouraged many in their faith. There are adults who point to their experiences as a teen that grounded them in what they believe and attribute current practice to things they learned in youth group. That said, the focal point of this thesis is not individual spiritual development but the effectiveness of youth ministry to nurture students in the intergenerational Christian community and conversely that community's ability to welcome the next generation and continue the process of growth.

This clarity not only helped frame this work, but understand the scope and problem in my own career. I took comfort in how the teenagers who were involved in the ministries I led and who were now adults, have a general fondness for Jesus and compassion for people. They have great memories of the time we spent together and have a generally favorable view of Christianity because they knew me, but very few made the transition from youth into committed congregant. Many youth workers, like myself, can point to "successes." There are the kids who have a better sense of God or of self, a greater view of the world and the compassion needed to walk as Jesus walked. We can list kids that we have helped escape substance abuse, navigate relationships, heal family wounds, and discover their unique gifting. However, when we point to those kids, we

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<sup>7</sup> Yaconelli.

must confess that we often point outside the walls of the historical church. I believe we must explore our praxis of faith formation if we are to change the story.

### Process

My first method of research was to formulate an accurate picture about the landscape of youth ministry and longevity. As a career youth minister, I am very familiar with the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) and the many polls done to gauge the religious life of the North American teenager. What I found surprising is that the research on youth ministry tended to stop at the level of youth themselves and the research did not extend to gauge the results of youth ministry on adults who were, at one time, youth. If the mainline church is in steady decline<sup>8</sup> then we have to ask about the factors leading to the decline. There is legion research on the subject of church decline, but very little research on the correlation between the current youth ministry model and the present state of the mainline church. The lack of research lead me to consider alternative locations for research. All one has to do is try and find the churches or cultures that seem to be defying these statistics and take a look at their models of ministry in order to form a picture of factors contributing to growth versus factors that contribute to decline.

Secondly, in order to more accurately understand the long term effects of youth ministry, I conducted some of my own research to see if the trends produced by the NSYR held up over time. I polled 138 adults who had grown up in church. The data from this poll allowed me to see correlations between youth experience and youth longevity.

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<sup>8</sup> "Mainline Protestants make up shrinking number of U.S. adults | Pew ...." 18 May. 2015, accessed 7 Feb. 2017, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/18/mainline-protestants-make-up-shrinking-number-of-u-s-adults/>.

Many of the results surprised me as they seemed to run contrary to the more widely held beliefs for youth attrition. Third, I spent a great deal of time using Wilson Memorial Church and similar congregations as a lab to explore correlations between periods of growth and decline. With this aspect of my research, I was able to have add “in field” experience to test my academic research.

### Definitions and Focus Points

For the sake of clarity, I want to define a few concepts utilized throughout the thesis. First of all, when I speak of youth ministry, unless otherwise qualified, I’m referring to the age-specific religious education of people ages 12-18 that focuses primarily on the spiritual development of children passing from childhood to adulthood. Traditionally, the work is done separately from the congregation at large in “youth groups” and aims to engage students in socialization, religious education, and evangelism/social action and is led by volunteers, parents, and/or a paid “youth” staff.

Secondly, it is important to note that the focus of this thesis is *congregational growth and sustainability*. This is not an assessment of the effectiveness of youth ministry to teach adolescents about religion, capture their sensitivity toward God, or judge their moral choices. This project seeks only to focus on the health and sustainability of the local Christian community.

Third, as a point of clarification, the expression of youth ministry being critiqued is found in predominantly white, suburban congregations. While the age-separated style is not exclusively the domain of any ethnic group, the dominant style in the U.S. is influenced culturally by white Christian expression.

## CHAPTER 2

### ENGAGING THE FIELD:

#### MALAN NEL'S "YOUTH MINISTRY: AN INCLUSIVE CONGREGATIONAL APPROACH"

I was first introduced to Malan Nel's work 15 years ago through a book called "Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church".<sup>9</sup> Edited by Mark H. Senter III, "Four Views..." is a volume in which four scholars tackled four perspectives of youth ministry then critiqued one another. At that time I was firmly entrenched in what Senter's book identifies as the Missional Model, which sees teens and teen culture as a foreign land and youth workers as missionaries. I had just taken a position with the para-church organization Young Life after leaving my first full time youth pastorate. At Hydewood Park Baptist Church in North Plainfield, NJ I ran a weekly youth ministry of over 100 kids from the urban, multi-cultural neighborhood. The gap between the church and the youth group grew to a size impossible to traverse as the kids that attended Wednesday night youth group were called the "neighborhood kids" and the kids whose family attended the church regularly were called the "church kids". Issues of race were certainly

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<sup>9</sup> Wesley Black, Chap Clark, and Malan Nel, *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church: Inclusive Congregational, Preparatory, Missional, Strategic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

prevalent as this historically white congregation as it dealt with the challenges of a racially diversifying community. As the gap between my identification with these neighborhood kids and growing unrest in the congregation increased, a change was imminent. Leaving the church, I joined the staff of a para-church youth organization that allowed me to continue ministry to these kids. As youth “missionary” I went to where the kids were, entrenching my own estrangement from the church. What I observed was a cultural dissonance between the world of adults and the world of teenagers. This was clearly replicated in the church and I saw myself leading the charge into this mysterious world of adolescents.

In the situation I found myself I would have joined the chorus of criticism leveled toward Dr. Nel’s Inclusive Congregational Approach written about in the aforementioned volume. I found the relationship between the church and youth untenable. If relevant and transformative ministry was going to happen, it could not be done within the traditional church structure. Before I engage the criticisms leveled toward Nel’s approach found in Senter’s work, I first want to outline Nel’s perspective on youth ministry.

### **A Covenantal Perspective**

Importantly, Nel’s argument begins from a theological perspective, specifically that of covenant.<sup>10</sup> In Nel’s view, God’s redemptive act happens through God’s promise to God’s community, or corpus, of which youth are a part.<sup>11</sup> Following from this theological grounding, Nel explains, where the church has gone wrong is to overlay the redemptive process of the corpus with modern pedagogical theory that placed youth as

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<sup>10</sup> Malan Nel, *Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Congregational Approach* (Malan Nel, 2000), 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

the center of attention instead of a catechistic expression of a comprehensive ministry.<sup>12</sup> The church is the macro expression of this redemptive covenant community in the way that the family is the micro expression.<sup>13</sup> Family dynamics change with the passage of time and the life stages of each member, but the goal of communal progression remains. Ideally, a family grows together and not apart which requires change and growth to be axiomatic. A parent cannot use the same parenting techniques with a child of 2 years old as is done with a child of 19 or a child of 45, though there is a consistent family value system throughout the child's life. The change in the child requires change in the parent as growth also requires change among siblings. Unhealthy families are those who cannot adapt to change. These families are marked by conflict and often separation and estrangement. These characteristics are often recognizable in the church.

In the church, it is God that supplies the sphere for change, the *ekklesia*.<sup>14</sup> In the *ekklesia*, there is a gathering of people who through the Spirit of God are experiencing change, thus there is no other community on earth that, in theory, is a safer place for people in transition. There are elders who provide anchor-points as the whole community grows and develops together. Nel's theological starting point is key to understanding the practical approach to youth ministry he develops.

### **Growing Together vs. Growing Apart**

Modern youth ministry finds its roots in the creation of a youth subculture. A further explanation of the history of modern youth ministry can be found in chapter 3,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 22



where I address the rise of para-church youth organizations in the 1940's. It is clear that prior to the industrial revolution and the rise of a span of age called adolescence, the church mostly grew together. They celebrated new births, went through social changes together, wrestled with theological challenges together, and then often at death, it was mourned in that same together church. Prior to the end of the 19th century, people moved from childhood to adulthood somewhere in their early teens. Children grew to marrying age, took their place in the family farm or business, or began an apprenticeship. The economics of the industrial revolution, either from the success of parents as industry leaders or the scarcity of jobs created from automation and a rising immigrant class, forced these young workers from the job market and created an idle class that, due to child labor laws, could not work. This allowed for the creation of a youth class or youth culture as “teenagers”<sup>15</sup> had more time on their hands than schooled children or working adults. This period is characterized by an “in-between” experience of being physically ready for all of the symbols and acts of adulthood but being told to wait until 18 or 21 or more. In this social environment, teens are left to establish their own system of becoming as they have left childhood but are having to wait for adulthood.<sup>16</sup> This individualization process gave teens the new options of how to spend their time and raised questions of how they would relate to the adult world as they created their own culture.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that adolescence is a created social class, not a physiological stage of aging. There are a host of factors that led to the creation of this class, and ensure its maintenance, such as the economics of the industrialized world, the furtherance of higher education, and family planning. For further study, see Jeffery Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004)

<sup>16</sup> Nel, *Youth Ministry*, 32 .

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 38

**“Wait until you are older.”**

Clearly, education stepped in as an answer to the problem of adolescence as it became more common for people to continue their education through high school. However, it is the effect on the church that is critical to our understanding here. Youth ministry as we understand it began to emerge in this new adolescent environment as church practices followed culture change. Emerging adults were given a “wait until you are older” signal even though theologically children were confirmed into the whole church in their early teenage years. To address the problem of the “not yet” generation of people, age-specific categories of ministry were born that were focused primarily on Christian education, ethics, and acts of service driven characteristically by youth culture. Nel argues that this focus of adolescent development began to distance the church from the teleological drive of faith formation.

**Teleological Questions**

Teleological, that which has to do with purpose, departure points are critical to the formation of praxis of youth ministry.<sup>18</sup> Nel suggests that the theological purpose of youth ministry is the building up of the church.<sup>19</sup> While this seems elementary, it does expose the departure points of other views. It is helpful to return to Senter to clarify why Nel’s viewpoint is critical to a clear understanding of how youth ministry’s purpose is viewed in the U.S. Out of the four views in Senter’s book, three are from the U.S. and would be considered evangelical, contrasted with Nel who represents ministry in the Global South and speaks from a Dutch Reformed context.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.,63.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Senter represents what is called the “strategic” view; the strategy being the establishment of a new church through the efforts of youth ministry.<sup>20</sup> For Senter, the teleological point is theological continuity.<sup>21</sup> There is a responsibility that the church has to pass along the theology of the Bible defined by the original church. If theology is the prime directive, then the local church is only a temporary structure to contain the theology and new churches springing up to meet cultural distinctives is a good thing. The “missional” model, suggested by Clark<sup>22</sup> begins with adolescents as people outside of the fellowship that it is the call of the church to reach. Clark’s perspective is that we, through programs and relationships, translate faith to these “foreigners” with the hopes of bringing them into fellowship. However, the goal is personal salvation not the building of the church.<sup>23</sup> Black’s approach, called the “preparatory” approach sees youth ministry as a leadership-training center to prepare adolescents for service in the church.<sup>24</sup> This viewpoint sees the purpose of the church, and conversely youth ministry, as a service community working together for a cause. While this is done within the church and is key to the church fulfilling its mission, Nel would not see that as the prime directive.

When Nel describes the building up of the local church, he sees it from the work of God in God’s church and youth needing to be a part of the whole in order to experience God’s work of building.<sup>25</sup> What Nel is calling for is a basic understanding of the oneness of the church and the work of God to grow and direct the corpus as a whole.

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<sup>20</sup> Wesley Black, Chap Clark, and Malan Nel, *Four Views of Youth Ministry and the Church: Inclusive Congregational, Preparatory, Missional, Strategic* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 117.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>25</sup> Nel, *Youth Ministry*, 64.

What happens to the church happens together with youth and vice versa. Thus for Nel, youth ministry is a ministry of participation in congregational life.<sup>26</sup> If the church is the visible demonstration of the Kingdom of God where all people regardless of age, gender, sexuality, or race gather as one and figure out how to love one another, we must commit to living life together.

This makes youth ministry the responsibility of the whole congregation, a key component of the inclusive congregational approach.<sup>27</sup> The ministries of the church are ministries to the whole church, which means youth are both being ministered to and doing ministry in every corner of congregational life. Central to Nel's perspective is that youth ministry too often has been another ministry of the church instead of every ministry considering where youth might fit.<sup>28</sup> This means that we do not ignore the differentiated nature of youth ministry, but recognize the uniqueness of what age means to each member of our congregation and make sure our preaching, worship, teaching, pastoral care, leadership, etc, speaks to each generation in attendance.<sup>29</sup> As Nel has pointed out elsewhere, our question must be how we are developing community during the natural process of individualization taking place in the period of transition to adulthood.<sup>30</sup>

Nel takes the last two sections of the book fleshing out the practical ramifications of how each role in the church can adapt to consider youth in their work. This approach is intended to foster growth as corpus and not as individual. The challenge to adoption is how to reconsider our Western ideals of individualism and a lower value on the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.,68.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.,70.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.,68

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.,88

<sup>30</sup> Malan Nel, "Identity Formation and the Challenge of Individuation in Youth Ministry," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 1, no 2 (2003): 79-101.

community as a whole. As we will see, this sense of exaggerated individualism is largely the product of a uniquely U.S. take on Eurocentric cultural ideals. Children and, as a result, teenagers, from more homogenous minority communities are socialized differently than those from dominant white culture.<sup>31</sup> Dominant white culture has often been seen in idealistic fashion, however, we will find that there is great contribution in minority socialization practices that provide insight to the problem of church attrition.

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<sup>31</sup> Brad Christerson, Korie L. Edwards, and Richard W. Flory, *Growing up in America: The Power of Race in the Lives of Teens* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 3.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE PROBLEM OF MAINLINE CHURCH ATTRITION

#### **State of the Mainline Church**

In 1972, 28% of Americans identified themselves as belonging to a mainline congregation according to the General Social Survey. That number had dropped to 12.2% in 2014.<sup>32</sup> In a 2013 report by the Presbyterian Church, USA (PCUSA), the trend is clearly one of severe decline. Since between 2002 and 2013 the PCUSA reports a membership decline of nearly 700,000 members.<sup>33</sup> The United Methodist Church (UMC) reports that for the last 10 years, the General Council on Finance and Administration statistics show worship attendance in the United States decreasing on an average of 52,383 per year.<sup>34</sup> The United Church of Christ (UCC) statistics suggest one lost congregation per week in the years between 2008 and 2015.<sup>35</sup> Peter Steinfels, Co-Director of Fordham's Center on Religion and Culture noted that if all of the Catholics who have left the church decided to form a single church they would constitute the

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<sup>32</sup> "The State of The Church in America: When Numbers Point To A New ...." accessed 7 Feb. 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2016/september/state-of-church-in-america-when-numbers-point-to-new-realit.html>.

<sup>33</sup> "Reported - Presbyterian Church (USA), accessed 7 Feb. 2017, [http://www.pcusa.org/site\\_media/media/uploads/research/pdfs/comparative\\_statistics\\_2013.pdf](http://www.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/research/pdfs/comparative_statistics_2013.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> "Economist: Church in crisis but hope remains | The United Methodist ...." 20 May. 2015, accessed 16 Mar. 2017, <http://www.umc.org/news-and-media/economist-united-methodist-church-in-crisis>.

<sup>35</sup> "Fall 2016: The United Church of Christ: A Statistical Profile - UCC Files," accessed 16 Mar. 2017, <http://www.uccfiles.com/pdf/Fall-2016-UCC-Statistical-Profile.pdf>.

second largest church in the nation.<sup>36</sup> It is again important to stress that these figures only represent mainline churches. For example, Americans identifying themselves as Evangelical protestant is holding steady at around 25% of the reporting population, though no indicators of actual church attendance was listed in the data.<sup>37</sup>

The “crisis” then is not that Christianity as a religion is losing ground, but that mainline congregations are not effectively passing along core values or effectively retaining young members. This is clearly an area of concern for congregations whose values seem at odds with the evangelical church. While reports indicate that many of the people classified as millennials are choosing to identify with the “nones”<sup>38</sup> it is clear that the mainline church is doing battle on two fronts: secularism, represented by a growing number of millennials no longer identifying themselves with organized religion and evangelicalism. A 2006 article of the Christian Century notes that the Episcopal Church’s most precipitous decline happened after the 2003 ordination of New Hampshire Bishop V. Gene Robinson who was openly gay.<sup>39</sup> This moved many individuals and even parishes to a more evangelical orientation.<sup>40</sup> While one might raise the question as to why the mainline church would be at odds with the evangelical church, it is clear that two fronts present challenges to the mainline church. On the one front, the church is losing

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<sup>36</sup> "Further Adrift | Commonweal Magazine." 18 Oct. 2010, accessed 27 Feb. 2017, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/further-adrift..>

<sup>37</sup> "America's Changing Religious Landscape ...." 12 May. 2015, Accessed 7 Feb. 201, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

<sup>38</sup> "“Nones” on the Rise | Pew Research Center - Pew Forum on Religion ...." 9 Oct. 2012, accessed 27 Feb. 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

<sup>39</sup> ""Episcopal Membership Loss 'Precipitous'" by Dart, John - The ...." 14 Nov. 2006, accessed 27 Feb. 2017. <https://www.questia.com/magazine/1G1-154866496/episcopal-membership-loss-precipitous>.

<sup>40</sup> ""Episcopal Membership Loss 'Precipitous'" by Dart, John - The ...." 14 Nov. 2006, accessed 27 Feb. 2017. <https://www.questia.com/magazine/1G1-154866496/episcopal-membership-loss-precipitous>.

membership to the growing group of people who claim no religious affiliation. However, on the second front, there are issues of theology and political practice that are anathema to a long developed tradition and teachings attracting adherents to more evangelical expressions. As with any family who desires its children to carry on the values and name of the family of origin, the mainline church is struggling to make its message transfer to the next generation. This lack of clear message has made the clarity of the evangelical message or the logic of secularized spirituality more appealing. When coupled with the stylistic elements of multimedia and more contemporary music being offered outside the traditional mainline church order of worship, and unclear message simply comes off as out of touch and “ground” is lost. However, as we will explore in later in this chapter, being more contemporary or having an Evangelical theological framework are often used to critique the church, but I suggest it is symptomatic of poor faith formation and not systemic to church theology or practice.

### **Historically Black Protestant Churches as an Exception**

It should be noted that these trends are not shared in historically black Protestant churches.<sup>41</sup> These churches have remained statistically unchanged over the course of the religious landscape study conducted by Pew research (see appendix). This requires us to consider what characteristics allow for the immunity to the shrinking population. It is much more difficult to categorize the theology of a group of churches identified by a cultural heritage, but the ability of the black church to buck the trend is valuable to this

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<sup>41</sup> "Biggest Declines Seen Among Mainline Protestants | Pew Research ...." 7 May. 2015, accessed 7 Feb. 2017, [http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-1-the-changing-religious-composition-of-the-u-s/pr\\_15-05-12\\_rls\\_chapter1-01/](http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-1-the-changing-religious-composition-of-the-u-s/pr_15-05-12_rls_chapter1-01/).



project.

In 1991, William Myers published a comparison study between the youth ministry styles of historically black congregations and historically white congregations. Meyers suggests that clues may be found in how white congregations and black congregations view themselves. Where white congregations, representative of the dominant culture, valued individual education and the dynamics of competition, the Black church's myth of origin contained the dynamics of personal sharing.<sup>42</sup> Myers observes that white churches describe their organization as a figurative corporation while the African-American church sees itself as a politically aware spiritual kinship. Youth ministry, in the traditional model, is viewed as fragmenting the church and creating a second congregation alongside the intergenerational congregation.<sup>43</sup> While there are a number of African-American churches that borrow from the dominant U.S. model, it is notable that a whole-community perspective with intergenerational interaction has gone a long way to resisting the attrition characterized by white mainline churches. This is reflected in Stewart who suggests that key to the continued growth and health of the African-American congregation was a comfort with the nature of being African-American and commitment to the interpersonal relationships that are key to their survival.<sup>44</sup> Susanne Johnson sees this link between spirituality and survival in her exploration of faith-based youth community organizing (YCO) where youth and their adult members are trained in "the art of public life and public theology" and connect "the traditional resources of

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<sup>42</sup> William Myers, *Black and White Styles of Youth Ministry: Two Congregations in America*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>44</sup> Carlyle Fielding Stewart, *African American Church Growth: 12 Principles of Prophetic Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 42.

Christian spirituality to the social, economic, and political realities that shape their daily experience and that of their families.”<sup>45</sup> Involving youth in the YCO experience dissolves the dissonance youth sometimes experience between church and “real life.” They are showed how their Christian faith and subsequent church family engages the real life problems of their local community.

### **The Global South as an Exception**

The growth trend is also important to note in the Global South. In 1910, the Global South only accounted for 17.8% of the population of Christians worldwide. That number as of 2010 shows that now the majority of Christians now inhabit the Global South. While some of this growth early on can be attributed to western evangelism, it is clear that Christianity in the south is doing an effective job at transferring the faith to each generation and insulating themselves from the trends affecting the church in the global north. We will be considering characteristics of church life and faith transfer of the Global South in this project. Study after study indicates that the shrinking numbers spoken of are merely a problem of the Global North (Europe and North America) with the center of Christianity, since 1980, moving to the southern hemisphere.<sup>46</sup>

From the Pew research table (appendix), it is easy to see how Christianity is no longer a northern and western religion.<sup>47</sup> In 1910, there were only 9 million Christians

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<sup>45</sup> Suzanne Johnson, “Subversive Spirituality in Youth Ministry at the Margins”, in *Children, Youth, and Spirituality in a Troubling World*, ed. Mary Elizabeth Moore and Almeda M. Wright (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2008), 154.

<sup>46</sup> "Think Christianity is dying? No, Christianity is shifting dramatically ...." 20 May. 2015, accessed 27 Feb. 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/05/20/think-christianity-is-dying-no-christianity-is-shifting-dramatically/>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2017.

<sup>47</sup> "Global Christianity - Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life." 19 Dec. 2011, accessed 27 Feb. 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>.

living in sub-Saharan Africa. By 2010, that number had grown to 516 million. The same trend can be seen in the Asian-Pacific region and South America. While missionary efforts in the modern era must be taken into account, this kind of long-term growth and sustainability cannot be attributed simply to evangelism.

### **Mormon Envy**

Dean also humorously suggests that she has experienced some envy in regards to how the Mormon Church has also been able to insulate itself from the problem of attrition.<sup>48</sup> A 1997 study showed that 63% of Mormons remained committed to the religion of their family of origin. This is a far cry from the 22.4% of mainline Protestants.<sup>49</sup> In addition, Kim's longitudinal study of Seventh-Day Adventists youth over a 10-year period also demonstrated a higher rate of retention (55%) than can be demonstrated by mainline Protestants.<sup>50</sup> Kim's study provides a valuable look at a relatively small group of people and provides additional data on leading factors that we will return to in chapter 5.

### **Non-Christian Religious Affiliation**

It is also worth noting trends related to non-Christian religious traditions. In a fascinating study taken on by the Pew Research Center, Hinduism, though not a

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<sup>48</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 45–60.

<sup>49</sup> Christian Smith and David Sikkink, "Social Predictors of Retention in and Switching from the Religious Faith of Family of Origin: Another Look Using Religious Tradition Self Identification," *Review of Religious Research* 45, no. 2 (2003): 188-206.

<sup>50</sup> Gyung Gu Kim, "A Longitudinal Study of Seventh-Day Adventist Adolescents Through Young Adulthood Concerning Retention in or Disaffiliation from the Church" (Ph.D. diss., Andrews University, 2001).

contender for the world's largest religion, experiences the lowest rate of "switching" than any other religion.<sup>51</sup> The numbers themselves are so small that it is easy to miss their significance. Following current trends, Hindus will lose 250,000 adherents to other religions (including non-religious affiliations) but gain 260,000. Compare this to the 106,000,000 expected to leave Christianity (and only 40,000,000 converting).<sup>52</sup> The issue is not a superiority of one religion over another. Rather how do we interpret why some denominations or religions are bucking the trend of attrition that has characterized North American (or North American and European) mainline Christianity in the recent decades?

### **Suggestions Made for Downward Trends**

This project is in no way the first attempt to answer the question of the decline of the North American, predominantly Caucasian, Protestant mainline church. Specificity is important here as this is not only the focus of this thesis, but as has been demonstrated, is not the reality of every Christian expression. Countless practitioners have published conclusions on these findings. The conclusions typically fall under three broad categories:

- 1) Weak or unclear theology (liberal vs. conservative),
- 2) Disconnect from "old" ways and desire for new ways of doing church (style); and,
- 3) Distractions from secular culture (secularization).

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<sup>51</sup> "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010 ...." 2 Apr. 2015, accessed 1 Mar. 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

<sup>52</sup> "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010 ...." 2 Apr. 2015, accessed 2 Mar. 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>.

## Weak or Unclear Theology

By far the most common suggestion, most often made by more evangelical theologians or pastors, is that the mainline church's attrition can be traced to the embrace of a modernist theological orientation. Kelly, writing in 1978, noticed the trend that churches focused on the: "...essential function of religion" defined as "making life meaningful in ultimate terms."<sup>53</sup> I believe it is that term "ultimate" that has caused the greatest distinction between liberal theology with an emphasis on how the gospel moves our present human life. Many of the critiques of mainline or "liberal" Protestantism loved to quote Niebuhr in their critique of American Protestantism as in Demerath:<sup>54</sup>

"A god without wrath, brought men without sin, into a kingdom without judgment, through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross."<sup>55</sup>

Even as recently as Jan 2, 2017, an article in the Washington Post, mentioning the United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran, Presbyterian (U.S.A.) and Episcopal churches by name, cited theological liberalism as a reason for decline while those with a "conservative Protestant theology", which the author defined as a literal belief in the Bible, are experiencing growth.<sup>56</sup> Clearly, articles in more popular sources like the Washington Post are far more suspect than a peer-reviewed journal like Kelly's in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, but it is important to consider opinions that have flowed into popular thinking. While many may assume this is a testament to the

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<sup>53</sup> M. Kelley, "Why Conservative Churches are Still Growing," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 17, no. 2 (1978): 165-172.

<sup>54</sup> N.J. Demerath, "Cultural Victory and Organizational Defeat in the Paradoxical Decline of Liberal Protestantism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34, no. 4 (1995): 458-469.

<sup>55</sup> The quote, though often used in critical writing, can be found in its original form in Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Pr., 1988).

<sup>56</sup> "Liberal Churches are Dying. But conservative Churches are Thriving ...." 4 Jan. 2017, accessed 2 Mar. 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/01/04/liberal-churches-are-dying-but-conservative-churches-are-thriving/>.

validity of evangelical faith, comparisons can be made to the levels of retention and growth in other systems of belief such as Islam, Mormonism, and even the “nones” (as has become the popular way of describing those without a distinct religious faith). The argument may be made that there is a clue in the shared conviction of religious belief that has little to do with the object or tenants of that belief or the veracity of religious teachings.

### **Old vs. “New” Ways of Doing Ministry**

A commonly held belief is that the rise of the non-denominational movement and the decline of the mainline church can be traced to the different tastes of the old vs. the young. In 1999, I remember attending what was billed as a “young singles” worship service out of a local Baptist church with a few of the graduates of my youth group who were enjoying this “new” thing that was happening in our community. The service was held in the chapel of the church and the place was crawling with 20-somethings. Soon, lights were lowered; screens came on displaying the words to the songs that the musicians, in a rock band configuration, were inviting the crowd to sing. After the band’s set and the offering (explained to me as a requirement of Baptist polity), a young preacher with a pompadour and sideburns proceeded to give a sermon that incorporated video and language geared toward the sensibilities of the generation that was present. A few years later, the group became self-sustaining and broke from its parent church and planted itself as a new congregation, maintaining the same style of doing church, and in recent years has been replicating itself in communities around northern New Jersey. Most recently, the church acquired the property of St. Paul’s United Church of Christ in Garwood, NJ, a dying mainline church, for another campus. Citing the success of their

last acquisition, Mountainside Gospel Chapel whose own membership had dwindled to 29 before selling to Liquid Church, Pastor Tim Lucas said: "We lovingly call our first church merger our "Miracle at Mountainside," and the news about the incredible growth that took place is what prompted the leaders at St. Paul's to reach out to us about a merger."<sup>57</sup> Lucas notes that building that formerly housed Mountainside Gospel Chapel now sees 900 people attend weekly. As Carney notes, this methodology is nothing particularly new as it mirrors the style of the revivalists of the 19th and early 20th centuries.<sup>58</sup> Carney cites examples such as Lakewood Church in Texas (the 20,000+ church led by Joel Osteen) and Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, IL. The latter, Carney notes, chose to adopt a model called "seeker-sensitive" and used "its Sunday services to reach the unchurched through polished music, multimedia, and sermons referencing popular culture and other familiar themes"<sup>59</sup> It is also worth noting that Willow Creek grew from a youth group called "Son City" led by Bill Hybels, who has been the senior pastor since its first service in 1975. The church website claims 25,000 in attendance each week across its 7 locations.<sup>60</sup> All three churches, and many like them, not only depend on technology in their services, but also make use of mass media such as television and the internet to reach a wide audience much like revivalist preachers of the early 20th century took advantage of radio.

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<sup>57</sup> "Liquid Church to Relaunch 109-year-old Church On October 9th, Its ...." 26 Sep. 2016, accessed 2 Mar. 2017, <http://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/liquid-church-to-relaunch-109-year-old-church-on-october-9th-its-second-church-rebirth-in-central-jersey-300333480.html>. Accessed 2 Mar. 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Charity Carney, "Lakewood Church and the Roots of the Megachurch Movement in the South," *Southern Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2012).

<sup>59</sup> Carney, "Lakewood Church," 2012.

<sup>60</sup> "The History of Willow Creek Community Church." accessed 2 Mar. 2017, <http://www.willowcreek.org/en/about/history>.

It would be impossible to argue the effectiveness of this model to draw large crowds into the message of Christianity. The question must be raised as to the shared mission of the church. Evangelical Christianity has its mission in its name. The goal is the communication of their perspective on the message of the gospel, which is individual salvation from the penalty of sin. In this way, the method becomes the message, much like Finney, Semple, Graham, or Billy Sunday before them. If the goal, or call, is to get the central message of evangelical Christianity to as many people as possible, then the evangelical method is clearly effective.

### **Secular Distractions**

If I had to rank the most common gripe about shrinking numbers of youth among the elder members of congregations I serve, it is that activities for kids such as sports or extracurricular activities have now found their way to Sunday morning. McMullin studied 16 congregations in decline and found that both clergy and members of the congregations overwhelmingly cited the secularization of Sunday morning, specifically kid sports and openness to work, as the reason for decline.<sup>61</sup> McMullin describes being surprised at the results of the survey, which he notes as follows:

Although survey respondents identified other possible factors, no other reasons were mentioned as frequently. The general busyness of life was blamed by 17.9%, while 13.4% believe people do not attend church because of specifically religious reasons ("People don't believe they need God in their lives," "They are not saved," "Do not have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ," "They have lost focus on God," "Fear of being confronted with their sins"). Only 8.2% thought it related to people's negative attitudes toward churches, and even fewer (6.4%) thought that people find the church irrelevant. A mere 4.3% answered that people do not attend church because the church is not doing what it needs to do, and only 3.3%

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<sup>61</sup> Steve McMullin, "The Secularization of Sunday: Real or Perceived Competition for Churches," *Review of Religious Research* 55, no. 1 (2013): 43–59.



said that it is because church is boring”<sup>62</sup>

McMullin expressed that the most notable element to this survey was that people saw factors of decline as external to the congregation and not internal.<sup>63</sup> This perspective is not true for every pastor polled. McMullin sought out two growing churches, both who had experienced severe decline and were now in a season of comparatively explosive growth, to text and see if growth is a factor in how a congregation answers the question. The pastors of the growing churches responded with a far more internal perspective, citing the church's inability to change antiquated forms with the more modern needs of culture. Elder members of declining congregations often wax nostalgic for “good old days” when the church was full, but have a very difficult time connecting declining membership with form. Understandably, it is a challenge to say that something internal is a cause for decline when the forms of worship presently practiced and programs presently offered were the ones in place when the church was full. One can see how pastors and congregants conclude that there must be external factors for decline since the internal forms proved effective at another time in history. This perspective is a caution flag to the churches presently in a state of growth that attribute their success with the ability to present their message in modern forms. At one time, churches in decline would have said the same thing.

My critique of these reasons for congregational decline, I believe, is that they betray a perspective of church that is more reflective of an American consumer mentality of brand success than of a growing and committed faith community. Theology could be pointed to as a culprit if it were not true that conservative churches have the same

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

complaints about the secularization of Sunday morning that the mainline churches do. Secularization could carry the blame if it were not clear that there are many growing churches around the country that grow in communities where there are Sunday morning activities and open retail outlets. The issue of contemporary form vs. antiquated form has a clear position to argue from numerical success, but these churches have not been in existence long enough to gauge their ability to retain growth among membership over the course of generations.

### **Considering Faith Formation**

This brings us to the subject of how congregations transfer belief and faith practice to the next generation. This is most commonly referred to as youth ministry. Tacit in many of the research studies is the understanding that young adulthood is the point of disconnect for many congregants. Responsively, churches pour a great deal of effort and resources into developing spiritual programs for youth. Yet, with all of these methods and resources, we have yet to stop our young adult members from leaving. The research cited above shows the mainline church that is the focus of this thesis loses over half of its developing young adults primarily into two categories: the “nones” and the evangelicals. This indicates that students are graduating without a clear understanding of church teaching or theology. Most students find themselves comfortable with this “faith” and move into their life with church as a low priority. The National Study of Youth and Religion (NYSR) has referred to this “misbegotten stepcousin” of the Christian faith as *Moralistic Therapeutic Deism*, which is “supplanting Christianity as the dominant

religion in American Churches.”<sup>64</sup> They carry a sense of good, a sense of God, and respect for others, but a disconnect from institutional religion. The rest find themselves dissatisfied with that lack of clarity and embrace Evangelicalism with a literal view of the Bible expressed in modern form and language.

From a particular perspective, youth ministry is absolutely doing its job because the kids we are graduating leave with the faith they have been taught: namely, God loves you no matter what and youth ministry is the most fun part of Christianity. Congregations hope that a vibrant youth ministry will result in congregational growth and sustainability. Their youth ministry is engaging, social, relevant, and fun. Some students even have significant leadership roles. However, when they graduate from the youth ministry they enter an environment where engagement is not the same, relevance is strained, fun is largely absent, and where they have no leadership roles. Some, of course, join the youth ministry staff like a high school graduate that finds the way back to the high school of origin because it was a place they were happiest. If we do not take a serious look at the place where most of our congregation members disengage from our congregations, we will continue to look for solutions in the wrong place.

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<sup>64</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 7.

## CHAPTER 4

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF YOUTH MINISTRY IN THE UNITED STATES

#### **Youth Ministry in the Global North**

Growing up as a teen in the 1980's, adolescence as a stage of life was a given. I saw myself, and my world reflected in the movies of John Hughes, found myself around the T.V. in my basement watching Friday Night Videos, and personally felt the isolation and angst of the “not a child/not an adult” world of being a teenager. The “back in my day” criticisms of adults further exaggerated the already wide gap that existed between my world and “theirs”. I entered youth ministry as a teen, beginning to take on leadership roles at 18. As a youth, my primary spiritual guidance came in a para-church ministry called Student Venture (the high school ministry of Campus Crusade for Christ). This experience provided confirmation I needed that the church of my origin was out of touch with not only teenagers, but also God. My experience as a teenager became my primary motivation to become a youth pastor.

Over the years, I've taken many critical looks at ministry as a professional practitioner. I've examined style, program, curriculum, and methodology of youth ministry. However, adolescence and youth ministry itself was always a given. After all, I was a child of the 80's and understood tacitly that teenagers were misunderstood and marginalized and my job was to bring them the message of acceptance and love offered in the gospel. One of the underlying questions of this project was why myself and other

youth ministry practitioners in the Western world, specifically the United States, were not alarmed at our comfort with the gap between the adolescent world (or church) and the church at large. Too often, if youth ministers were honest, youth ministry in the global north is done in proximity to, or even in spite of, the local intergenerational congregation.

### **The Rise of Adolescence**

Youth ministry is a comparatively new component of church life due to the fact that prior to the industrial revolution there were no adolescents to create a specific ministry to serve. Adolescence, while a description of age and development, is an invention (and luxury) of a change in the economy of the industrialized world. A shift can be seen, as Chin points out, from the Antebellum South where family relationships and rites of passage were a given with conflicts coming only from outside threats to the family, to Sinclair Lewis' 1922 novel, *Babbitt*.<sup>65</sup> In the novel, Lewis describes a family dinner where, after teenage son Ted leaves to go spend time with friends, his mother reflects on the distance between the youth of this generation and the world of adults:

“Ted’s a good boy,” he said to Mrs. Babbitt.

“Oh, he is!”

“Who’s these girls he’s going to pick up? Are they nice girls?”

“I don’t know. Oh dear, Ted never tells me anything anymore. I don’t understand what’s come over the children of this generation. I used to have to tell Papa and Mama everything, but seems children to-day have just slipped away from all control.”<sup>66</sup>

Chinn connects the invention of adolescence to the economic changes

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<sup>65</sup> Sarah Chinn, *Inventing Modern Adolescence: The Children of Immigrants in Turn-of-the-Century America* (New Brunswick, NJ : Rutgers University Press, 2009).

<sup>66</sup> Sinclair Lewis, *Babbitt* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2002).

surrounding the move from the family farm to the industrialized cities at the end of the 19th century and turn of the 20th. In this assumption, we have to include the rise in immigration at the same time as more and more Europeans were descending on the industrialized cities in the United States.<sup>67</sup> With adults now working long factory hours instead of a family farm or trade, older children (or young adults, depending on your point of view) were left with more spendable time and income. Adolescence became widely recognized as a sociological reality with G. Stanley Hall's 1904 two-volume work: *Adolescence: Its Psychology, and Its Relations to Anthropology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*.<sup>68</sup> Hall's primary contention was that adolescence was a time of great tension (storm and stress) where the person is in conflict with his or herself constantly going through pendulum swings that eventually lead to adulthood. For Hall, adolescence was, as it was for myself as a young youth minister, a given. The adult responsibility is to try to understand what is going on and provide avenues of nurture and development appropriate to the condition. Hall's views were widely accepted and used as starting points for academic study, framing the exploration of adolescence in terms of tension and developmental change.<sup>69</sup>

Hall was not without critics, two studies particularly worthy of consideration.

Quoting from Dubas, Miller, and Petersen who reflected on Margaret Mead:

Mead's *Coming of Age In Samoa* and her later work *Growing Up in New Guinea* were influential in promoting more positive aspects of adolescent development and provided evidence that this transition was not necessarily tumultuous. Moreover, examples of adolescence free of storm and stress were considered evidence that the tumultuous experience of American adolescents was not

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<sup>67</sup> Chinn, *Inventing Modern Adolescence*, 4.

<sup>68</sup> "Adolescence: Its Psychology and its Relations to ... - Wiley Online Library," accessed 6 Mar. 2017, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/aa.1904.6.4.02a00120/pdf>

<sup>69</sup> Judith Dubas, Kristelle Miller, and Anne Petersen, "The Study of Adolescence during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century," *The History of the Family: An International Quarterly* 8, no. 3 (2003): 375–97.

biologically determined but rather reflected the role of the cultural context in promoting these types of changes.”<sup>70</sup>

What these studies served to do is to challenge the understanding that adolescence is a given and to suggest cultural factors that have led to its creation and are responsible for its nurture. Even with this alternative view, the predominant theory was that adolescents were inherently unique psychologically and physiologically, growing a field of academic study that not only influenced a pedagogy of adolescence and the commonality of high school, but I argue these assumptions had a large impact on the church. With the acceptance of adolescence as an unchallenged reality by the 1920's, the church began to address the problem of the emergence of a new class of people who are not naturally following in the footsteps of their parents in regards to church membership and involvement.

### **The Church Responds**

It is worth noting that when we speak of youth ministry here, we are speaking of the dominant model of youth ministry practiced in the primarily Caucasian, suburban, and middle to upper income U.S. context. In chapter 3, we have indicated that there are cultural and economic factors that have somewhat insulated churches from the decline experienced by the mainline church. We will discuss those factors further in chapter 5. For the purposes of clarity, the modern age of youth ministry we are observing will be the model that emerged during World War II that was characterized by age-differentiated and targeted ministry toward adolescents who were establishing a culture quite distinct from adults. As teenagers had created a culture dominated by unique forms of music, fashion,

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<sup>70</sup> Dubas, Miller, and Petersen, “The Study of Adolescence.”

speech, literature, and recreation, so too this emerging form of ministry created a teen sub-culture in the church with unique music, activities, style of communication, and a distinctly isolated community when compared to earlier ecclesiastical models of faith formation. As Myers pointed out, even large African-American churches do not have a youth pastor or youth department per se (though there are many exceptions) but all ministries support the Sunday morning worship experience.<sup>71</sup> The same can be true of churches from lower income communities where hiring youth staff is a luxury. Sometimes the numbers simply force people to remain in community. However, even Myers notes that the dominant model influences churches across cultural and economic lines, sometimes intentionally and sometimes tacitly.<sup>72</sup>

#### Robert Raikes and the Sunday School Movement

The earliest forms of modern age-specific ministry can be traced to Robert Raikes' attempt to quiet children making a ruckus on the Sabbath by instituting Sunday School. Raikes' grand experiment, which involved hours of study in more subjects than religion, grew into a movement teaching 1.2 million children by the 19th century.<sup>73</sup> While the modern Sunday School has been reduced to a weekly religious education program lasting about one hour, its roots can be traced to the Raikes model. The Sunday School movement is another one of those givens in the western church that only receives criticism in function, but not in form. However, even then, Raikes' movement was not

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<sup>71</sup> Myers, *Black and White Styles of Youth Ministry*, 118.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 176. Here, Myers quotes Ella Mitchel's "Black Nurture" in *Black Church LifeStyles*, ed. Emmanuel McCall (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1986), 64, where Mitchel suggests that Black churches became over dependent on the white Sunday School model in post-slavery America.

<sup>73</sup> "The rise and progress of Sunday schools; a biography of Robert ...." 2 Sep. 2008, accessed 6 Mar. 2017, <https://archive.org/details/riseprogressofsu00powe..>



without critics. In a 1878 sermon, Rev. Thomas Burns, who called this movement “a weed in the church”, is quoted as saying:

My great objection to Sunday-Schools is that I am afraid they will in the end destroy all family religion, and whatever has tendency to do this I consider it is my duty to guard you against. I might also show that these schools are hurtful to public religion, for it consists with my knowledge that children stay at home from church to prepare their questions for the even; and their families are divided when they ought to be together.<sup>74</sup>

Burns’ concern as he observed the emergence of an age-specific ministry separate from the church was not in Raikes’ content but in the form. Pulling children into an environment that separates them from their families, and by extension the larger church body, was feared by Burns to have detrimental impact on the family and the church as a whole. Prior to this movement, the church grew together, but now there are cracks in the body.

### **The Rise of Modern Youth Ministry**

I mention Raikes because I believe it was this movement that allowed the church to extend age-specific thinking as it confronted the new idea of adolescence. The church already had a comfort with age-specific ministry by the dawn of the 20th century. Movements such as the YMCA (1844), Christian Endeavor (1881), and even Boy Scouts of America (1910) sought to address the problem of the young with varying degrees of religious and social programming. These movements largely encouraged local church involvement but were uniquely outside of the church. For our purposes of study, I will argue that the beginning of the modern youth ministry model began in the 1940s with the

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<sup>74</sup> Edwin Wilbur Rice, *The Sunday School Movement 1780-1917, and the American Sunday School Union 1817-1917* (New York: Arno, 1971).

advent of the youth-specific ministries Young Life, Word of Life, and Youth for Christ respectively. The focal point of these ministries was addressing the wartime and postwar phenomena of a new youth culture. The industrial revolution and subsequent move to the cities took children from the far-flung family farm and moved them into close quarters with lots of people their own age. Growing prosperity and the public school movement turned kids from factory workers to students. By 1940, 50% of young adults had earned their high school diploma.<sup>75</sup> The postwar prosperity saw a movement back out of the cities, but this time it was from the city to homes in new subdivisions built on top of what were once family farms. The life of an adolescent was now largely spent with other adolescents at school creating their own language, style of dress, music, and social mores often at odds with the established adult world. Modern youth ministry stepped into this splintered off culture with the attempt to Christianize the youth phenomenon by still maintaining, and sometimes solidifying, their differentiation from adults.

### **The War Era**

In the late 1930's in Gainsville, TX, a Presbyterian minister by the name of Clyde Kennedy was concerned that students who attended Gainsville High School were no longer interested in traditional church programming. Kennedy hired seminarian Jim Rayburn part-time to involve himself in the adolescent world outside of the church. Rayburn began a club called Miracle Book Club that later became officially incorporated in 1941 as the Young Life Campaign. Rayburn insisted that the most effective model of reaching adolescents was outside of the church in the homes of students. Young Life

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<sup>75</sup> Jeffery Mirel, "The Once and Future School: Three Hundred and Fifty Years of American Secondary Education," *American Journal of Education* 106, no. 2 (1998): 334-40.

Clubs were gatherings noted by singing, parlor games, and “talks” centered on a basic evangelical gospel message.<sup>76</sup> At the same time, Jack Wyrzten was developing an adolescent outreach model based on a youth rally concept that developed into Word of Life Fellowship in 1940<sup>77</sup> which inspired a similar evangelical youth movement called Youth for Christ in 1946 who hired Billy Graham as its first full-time evangelist.<sup>78</sup> Largely, successful ministry to youth in post-WW II America was the work of para-church organizations that focused on personal salvation and Christian living while utilizing adolescent isolation as a vehicle for communication and recruitment. All three ministries, and a host of similar movements, grew rapidly to the point that in one generation these organizations owned retreat property and had expanded their movement nationally. However, this did not meet the original call of the Gainesville pastor whose primary concern was the disconnection of youth and the church.

### **The Church Follows**

In the 1960s, white mainline churches in the U.S., seeing the success of these youth organizations, had begun to adopt the para-church model. By 1970, youth groups modeled after these para-church youth movements were the norm in churches nationwide. In fact, when looking back at the youth ministry history of Wilson Memorial Church, the first youth pastor in Wilson’s memory was also on staff with the local Young Life chapter. In my interviews with the adults who were present in those days, the lines were blurred as to when they were at church and when they were at Young Life Club.

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<sup>76</sup> "History - Young Life," accessed March 6, 2017, <https://www.younglife.org/About/Pages/History.aspx>.

<sup>77</sup> "About - Word of Life Fellowship," accessed March 6, 2017. <http://www.wol.org/about/>.

<sup>78</sup> "History - Youth for Christ," accessed March 6, 2017. <http://www.yfc.net/about/history/>.

Borrowing from the model of the youth movements of the 1940s, the traditional youth ministry model included time for youth to be social, some sort of planned “fun” activity, singing “youth” songs, and some Bible teaching in the form of a “talk” from a leader or small group “rap session.” Para-church movements tended to take place in homes and not in churches and churches followed this pattern with the advent of the youth room, both with the intent of providing a place where students would feel more comfortable than they would in the main sanctuary of a church building.

### **The Golden Age**

By the 1980’s a whole generation of youth pastors, professionalized by the work of organizations like Youth Specialties (started in the late 1960’s by two youth pastors who wanted to equip youth pastors with good resources)<sup>79</sup> and new seminary programs focused on youth work, pushed youth ministry into a resource golden age with youth-specific music, video, curriculum, camps, and even clothing. The Youth Specialties National Youth Workers Conventions, which during this time was held in two locations, easily filled large convention center exhibit halls with companies selling products designed to be sold to the tens of thousands of youth workers in attendance. Yet, with all of the resources pumped into working with adolescents, the mainline church has not stopped its steady decline.

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<sup>79</sup> "The Story of YS - Youth Specialties," accessed March 6, 2017, <http://youthspecialties.com/about/history/>. It is also worth noting that one of the founders of this organization is the author of the article “Failure of Youth Ministry” mentioned in the introduction.

## A Time of Retooling

The 2000's have been an era of retooling in the area of youth ministry. Youth ministry in the 2000's has the luxury, or curse, of being able to look back on itself and its legacy and ask some serious questions. Olshine's 2013 book *Youth Ministry: What's Gone Wrong* is a comprehensive reflection from someone who has been in youth ministry for three decades and is struggling with key observations that bring into question the effectiveness of youth ministry. Olshine identifies 12 "problems" in youth ministry:

1. Youth ministry often excludes parents.
2. Leadership practices an attractional approach instead of one that takes the initiative.
3. Paid youth workers become "rock stars" for their youth group.
4. Youth ministry lacks a clear intention.
5. Youth ministry is program obsessed.
6. Volunteers are poorly trained.
7. Youth groups become "holy huddles" and do not equip students for the real world.
8. Youth group graduates are biblically illiterate.
9. Most students drop out after high school.
10. There is large-scale age-segregation.
11. Youth group has an island mentality and is disconnected with the larger church.
12. Youth workers practice poor soul care.<sup>80</sup>

Attempts to address each of the above twelve in some form has dominated the youth ministry bookshelves in the 21st century. Solutions have been suggested to make ministry "sustainable", "purpose-driven", "relational", "family-friendly", and "Adoptive".<sup>81</sup> My concern is that most of the writing seems to be attempts to make the current model better, when I believe we need to question if the problem lies in the model itself and not the execution of the model.

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<sup>80</sup> David Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What's Gone Wrong and How to Get It Right* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press 2013).

<sup>81</sup> See DeVries, Fields, Root, and Clark (the latter addressing the intergenerational problem)

The question for the sake of this study explores whether there is a tacit correlation between the rise of age-segregated ministry that is incongruent with the normal integrative process of church and the noticeable membership attrition experienced by the mainline church. A simple look at the timelines of when the numbers of mainline churches began a decline and when the non-denominational, evangelical church began to take hold in the United States, one sees a corollary with the rise of modern youth ministry. It is of particular importance to again remember that it is not Christianity that is on the decline, but the mainline church, an early practitioner of the para-church youth ministry model. While the non-denominational church finds its roots in the resistance to both fundamentalism and liberalism in the theological landscape of WWII, its true rise can be traced to the latter half of the 20th century.<sup>82</sup> As noted, this is also the timeline for the rise of modern youth ministry. The challenge with the study of the evangelical church movement is that we do not have long-term data to compare effective youth ministry practice across generations.

Over half of the non-denominational churches studied by Hartford Seminary's Faith Communities Today project report less than 20% of their membership over the age of 60.<sup>83</sup> While it is entirely possible that the non-denominational church has found the key to overcoming long-term attrition, they simply have not been in existence long enough to confirm their approach as a solution for long term attrition. Mainline churches are struggling in what Seibel and Nel called "The Traditioning Process"<sup>84</sup> by utilizing the

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<sup>82</sup> World Council of Churches, "Evangelical Churches" *World Council of Churches*, <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/church-families/evangelical-churches>, 2013.

<sup>83</sup> Scott Thumma "Nondenominational Congregations Today, A Report from FACT." *Hartford Institute for Religious Research* 2001.

<sup>84</sup> Seibel, C. L., and M. Nel. "Generation X, Intergenerational Justice and the Renewal of the Traditioning Process." *HTS Theological Studies* (2010). [scielo.org.za](http://scielo.org.za).

same basic principles practiced in non-denominational youth ministry today. These principles are more largely recognized in modern pedagogical theory than in a biblical praxis of faith formation and it is my contention that the evangelical church will be experiencing similar attrition crisis points in the coming generations.

### **Parallel Pedagogy and the Adoption of Curriculum Theory**

It is important to trace our foundational perspectives in faith formation to curriculum theory established at the beginning of the 20th century. One of the earliest and defining voices is Franklin Bobbitt who wrote in his 1918 work *The Curriculum*:

The central theory is simple. Human life, however varied, consists in the performance of specific activities. Education that prepares for life is one that prepares definitely and adequately for these specific activities. However numerous and diverse they may be for any social class they can be discovered. This requires only that one go out into the world of affairs and discover the particulars of which their affairs consist. These will show the abilities, attitudes, habits, appreciations and forms of knowledge that men need. These will be the objectives of the curriculum. They will be numerous, definite and particularized. The curriculum will then be that series of experiences which children and youth must have by way of obtaining those objectives.<sup>85</sup>

Approaches to curriculum theory (CT) have varied widely. However, by the beginning of the 20th century, common practice was to move children through an established educational system with each stage identified by an ordinal number (1st grade, 2nd grade, etc.) and characterized by a group of age-differentiated students gaining varying degrees of proficiency in subjects designed to prepare students in the “performance of specific activities” considered central to human life. Our educational system keeps students away from the home for six hours or more per day and involves parents most often as support

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[http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?pid=S0259-94222010000200007&script=sci\\_arttext&tIng=es](http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?pid=S0259-94222010000200007&script=sci_arttext&tIng=es).

<sup>85</sup> Babbit Franklin, *The Curriculum* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1918), 44.

volunteers for various support activities.

If the church has adopted curriculum theory in its praxis of faith formation, then we are working on a foundational assumption that if we give children the proper theological information, then they will be equipped for the activities of church life. Mercer suggests that in a church context, Christian education has been reduced to: “...instructional downloading of moralistic sound bites delivered to children through entertainment-oriented styles of teaching in a context sequestered from the practices of the wider community of faith.”<sup>86</sup>

Religious education, much like the various applications of CT, can take on different forms such as a traditional didactic style, rotational methods, discovery learning, and catechistic to name a few. Mercer looks at the rotational example, which uses different “workshops” to reinforce the subject matter of the day. The rotational model, as Mercer suggests, takes seriously Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences by engaging kids with the same story or theme from multiple angles that might include storytelling, music, art, play, etc.<sup>87</sup> Yet none of these theories calls into question the sheer definition of learning in an ecclesiastical context.

At a recent men’s breakfast, I had the opportunity to speak with a number of older members of our congregation. All of them admitted to becoming somewhat disconnected to church in college and early marriage (late 1960’s/early 1970’s) and came back to church when their children were young. When asked the inevitable question of why did they think it was important to bring their children back to church, all but one replied that

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<sup>86</sup> Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 163.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.



they wanted their children to have religious instruction. The children of those whose answer reflected an instructional perspective are, for the most part, not engaged in a local congregation. The one alternative answer had to do with a desire to have their children baptized into a local congregation. The desire was integration and belonging. Both of this congregant's children are highly involved in a local congregation. While this "diner" poll is not enough to base academic theory upon, it does mirror Mercer's assumption that children form identity through participation in practices. Running the theory out, churches should not be considered educational institutions but communities of practice identified by Mercer as a:

...group defined by a particular experience of social relations (expressed in the New Testament Greek term *koinonia*) gathered in relation to a peculiar set of practices, activities, and ways of making meaning that person's share and engage in over time and that produce identity both corporate and individual.<sup>88</sup>

I cannot help but see parallels between the development of an experiential community and the teaching method of Jesus as found in the New Testament. The gospels have examples of long-form lectures, such as the Sermon on the Mount, but the primary teaching method of Jesus seems to have been shedding further light on experiences that his disciples were having with him. Washing the disciples feet became a lesson in servant leadership (John 13: 3-17), a miraculous feeding becomes the backdrop to introduce himself as the Bread of Life (John 6:35), a gathering of children illustrate childlike faith (Matthew 18:1-4), and an afternoon in the temple allows an observation of a widow offering her last two coins (Mark 12:41-44). But beyond the teaching style, the content of the disciples learning seemed to be the practice of this early community and not the information being transmitted. It is a sobering question to ask if our observations of the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 172.

history and practice of modern youth ministry has betrayed a misunderstanding of the purpose of faith formation. The age-differentiated, insular practice of educational-based youth work has not resulted in growing and healthy congregations, but has led to severe loss into either evangelical expressions of faith or no expression at all. We must look to communities elsewhere that are able to see sustained growth and effective transitioning across generations.

## CHAPTER 5

### ALTERNATIVE PRAXIS FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH

#### **The Church in the Global South**

We have already explored the contrast between church growth figures in the Global North or “western” world and those of the Global South, namely Africa and Latin America. There is a distinct shift in the center of Christianity over the last century that has requires serious investigation. At this point, the scholarship required to do longitudinal studies that allow us to draw conclusions about faith formation and transitioning is limited. Studies that have been conducted show that even with strong numbers of adherents to the Christian religion, religious shifting from traditional Roman Catholicism to Protestant (mainly Pentecostal) denominations is happening across Africa and Latin America. This pattern of shifting can be seen in the religious landscape of the United States, with the major difference of more U.S. respondents leaving Christianity altogether.

#### **Latin America**

For example, according to Pew Research, the numbers of Christians in Brazil in 2011 was 175,770,000, accounting for 90% of the Brazilian population. That encapsulates every Christian denomination. Catholicism’s historical dominance in Brazil has given way to increasing Christian diversity. In 1940, only 2.6% of Brazil’s population

was Protestant. Now about 21% of the population is Protestant, the fastest growing being overwhelmingly Pentecostal.<sup>89</sup>

## **Africa**

Similar patterns can be seen in Africa. Christians across its 51 countries make it home to 25% of total Christians. In Nigeria, all of the major Christian groups have grown since the 1970s (when the U.S. started experiencing major decline) with the fastest growing affiliation being Pentecostal groups. Patterns of religious switching can be seen in Africa as well, though not as prominent. In Ethiopia, for example, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which can trace its roots back to the 4th century, held 95% of the Christian population until the 1980s. Now Protestants and Roman Catholics make up about 30% of the country's Christians.<sup>90</sup>

## **No “nones”**

What is striking to me about these numbers in African and Latin American contexts is the lack of representation of the “nones” that dominate the U.S. religious landscape. There may be a departure from familial religious traditions, but not the family religion at the core. In many cultures that comprise the Global South, family traditions, including family religion, are key to the identity of the individual. Research shows two characteristics of transitioning that are present in ethnic groups that have their roots in the Global South. First, there is a far greater sense of belonging to a family, kinfolk,

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<sup>89</sup> "Regional Distribution of Christians | Pew Research Center - Pew ...." 19 Dec. 2011, accessed 14 Mar. 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-regions/>.

<sup>90</sup> "Regional Distribution of Christians | Pew Research Center - Pew ...." 19 Dec. 2011, Accessed 14 Mar. 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-regions/>.

community, and culture that extends to faith life and creates identity and social location. Second, adolescence or “coming of age” is handled differently in communities of tradition and is characterized by community responsibility at an earlier age.

Ken Crane, in his book *“Latino Churches : Faith, Family, and Ethnicity in the Second Generation”* argues that the Latino church serves as a “community of memory” in which language, culture, and family traditions are maintained. In Christian practice and tradition, families can avoid what Crane calls “dissonant acculturation”. Dissonant acculturation can be seen across immigrant cultures in which teens and adults move in different paths and create new cultures that reflect the dominant culture.<sup>91</sup> Even in the case of immigrant families in the U.S. where there might be a religious pluralism (older members maintain strict catholic traditions while younger members are drawn to more protestant expressions), the shared Christian traditions keep spiritual harmony in the home.<sup>92</sup> In the Latino culture, religious festivals, home altars, blessings, and even the rite of quinceañeras are all ways of keeping displaced cultures connected to cultural identity.

### **Cognitive Belief vs. Corporate Belonging**

To a Western thinker, this sense of family or community faith raises red flags of a hermeneutical, and, I would argue, teleological nature. In western Eurocentric thought, religion is an expression of cognitive belief. Christian practice is affirmation of this belief. Looking back at the conversation regarding curriculum theory; in a western mindset, propositional-based education will lead to religious participation. When we

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<sup>91</sup> Ken Crane, *Latino Churches: Faith, Family, and Ethnicity in the Second Generation* (New York: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2003).

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

move out of the culture dominated by Anglo perspectives of transitioning, we find cultures for whom the value of tradition is connected to the value of what used to be called in the Nordic church: “believing in belonging”.<sup>93</sup> Niemelä traces the decline of the Nordic church to a shift away from the thinking that kept the church alive. Leaving behind the believing that was directed at being a part of each other, millennials have distanced themselves from the historic church.

When we explore a different hermeneutic, as Pineda-Madrid points out, we find a hermeneutic that assumes the human drive to be in communion with others and be self-possessed instead of the western idea of “getting at the meaning of a text.”<sup>94</sup> In many southern communities, the goal is each other instead of propositional adherence. Pineda-Madrid sees the shared traditions as helping communities maintain and develop identities both on a corporate level and an individual level. Traditions become stories to imagine self and allow people to see themselves as participants in a larger story.<sup>95</sup>

### **Jesus as Ancestor**

The connection of faith to family and community is also seen in how African traditions express themselves both in Africa and in African-American faith formation. Beyers and Mphahlele have done some interesting work tracing the understanding of ancestor to familial understandings of Jesus. While there is great diversity of thought

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<sup>93</sup> Kati Niemelä, “No Longer Believing in Belonging”—A Longitudinal Study of Generation Y from Confirmation Experience to Church Leaving,” 2015, accessed 7 April 2017, [https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/155633/No\\_longer\\_believing\\_in\\_belonging\\_NIE\\_MELA\\_SOCIAL\\_COMPASS\\_submitted\\_version\\_.pdf?sequence=1](https://helda.helsinki.fi/bitstream/handle/10138/155633/No_longer_believing_in_belonging_NIE_MELA_SOCIAL_COMPASS_submitted_version_.pdf?sequence=1).

<sup>94</sup> Nancy Pineda-Madrid, “Traditioning. The Formation of Community, The Transmission of Faith.” In *Futuring Our Past: Explorations in the Theology of Tradition*, ed. O. Espin and Gary Macy (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 211.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

within that which is called African, a few functions of ancestors are shared: companion on life's journey, mediator, guardians of traditions, and source of identity.<sup>96</sup> It is not uncommon in an African context to understand Jesus in terms of ancestral identity. Jesus is that companion on life's journey, he is the mediator between humanity and God, Jesus guards their shared traditions (such as communication), and through these traditions gives them a source of cultural and individual identity. Thus identification with Jesus connects Africans not only in families but unites them as Africans. This introduces Christianity as something far more than a system of belief, but as a person's social locator.

African-Americans have often been viewed through the lens of a cultural adherence to Christianity. Wallace Charles Smith asserts that the historically Black church was born from West African concepts of extended family and kinship. Smith sees the church growing and evolving as a "new family for those constantly being uprooted from their original families."<sup>97</sup> The historically Black church in the U.S. maintains these bonds of kinship that define the African-American church experience. The commitment to community can be heard in the lyrics to a popular gospel song:

*"I need you. You need me. We're all a part of God's body.  
Stand with me. Agree with me. We're all a part of God's body.  
It is his will that every need be supplied.  
You are important to me. I need you to survive."*<sup>98</sup>

Myers describes the youth ministry model of the historically Black church in terms of a kinship model "...centering on intergenerational, communal worship, and the

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<sup>96</sup> Jaco Beyers, and Dora N. Mphahlele. "Jesus Christ as Ancestor: An African Christian Understanding," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 65 no. 1 (2009): Articles 1-20.

<sup>97</sup> W. C. Smith, *Church in the Life of the Black Family* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1985) 22.

<sup>98</sup> Hezekiah Walker, "I Need You to Survive,"  
<http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/hezekiahwalker/ineedyoutosurvive.html>.

empowerment of adolescents...”<sup>99</sup> It is not uncommon to walk into a historically Black congregation and see youth serving either as musicians, worship leaders, dancers, ushers, or readers. Myers notes in his study, while there were age-specific ministries in the church, they all somehow supported the larger church experience with every member of the ministerial staff somehow involved in a “youth ministry”.<sup>100</sup>

### **Language and Cultural Dissonance**

Some cultures are finding it more difficult to avoid dissonant acculturation. My work with a Chinese congregation in Livingston, NJ modeled the impact of a cultural divide. The church was founded for Chinese nationals who had come to the United States for work in the rich scientific and technological job market of northern New Jersey. As a result, services were conducted in Mandarin and the people were able to share a cultural connection difficult to find in the host culture. However, children born in the U.S. and raised in American schools and in American culture did not share the language of their parents so the church began an “English” congregation to serve the needs of youth growing up between two cultures. Numerically, the effort was successful as there was a high level of engagement in the service that was held simultaneously as the Mandarin service. They were even able to start a youth group that welcomed Chinese teens not from their church. The problem is that as students graduated from this ministry and went to college, it was largely away from any real participation in a local church. With the cultural divide that already existed between the generations, this church experienced a crisis of attrition on two fronts: religiously and culturally as kids struggled with identity

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<sup>99</sup> Myers, *Black and White Styles of Youth Ministry*, 109.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.



formation outside of their family and religion.

### Coming of Age

The second area of identification has to do with the handling of adolescents and “coming of age.” A common word in the early part of the 21st century among millennials is “adulting”. A 2016 article for the Bergen County Record by Bill Ervolino highlights the arrival of this new word:

“There are oceans of not-yet words floating around these days, but the one that has recently captivated me is “adulting.” Some examples from Twitter: “I killed a roach all by myself last night and only screamed once. #adulting” “Had ice cream for dinner. Because I can. #adulting” “I was trying to buy fruit today and stood in front of cantaloupes for 15 mins googling ‘How to pick a good cantaloupe.’ #adulting” As you have (hopefully) figured out by now, adulting is the act of engaging in quasi-adult behavior. Or, as Urban Dictionary explains it: “To do grown-up things and hold responsibilities, such as a 9-5 job, a mortgage/rent, a car payment, or anything else that makes one think of grown-ups.”<sup>101</sup>

What is most intriguing about this word is that it is most often used by people well into what would be perceived as adulthood, those in their 20’s. Race and economic factors on both ends of the spectrum account for a lack of stepping into the adult world. Young adults with vast resources find themselves able to extend adolescence.

The HBO series *Girls* has often gotten criticized for what Witherington describes as:

its attention to a privileged class of educated, young, white adults who struggle with narcissistic and banal challenges: the protagonist Hannah Horvath (Lena Dunham) has been supported by her middle-class parents through college and beyond and has the luxury of choosing a job based on its capacity to fulfill her creative needs, not based on a need for economic survival.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ervolino, Bill. “Just #Adulting When You First Feel Grown Up.” *The Record* (Bergen County, NJ), 2016., InfoTrac Newsstand, EBSCOhost (accessed March 14, 2017).

<sup>102</sup> Despoina-Betty Kaklamanidou and Margaret Tally, *HBO’s Girls: Questions of Gender, Politics, and Millennial Angst* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

However, what the series does so well is explore a new post-adolescent reality where “Hannah seeks complete artistic freedom, and she asks her parents to provide it through continued support...”<sup>103</sup> instead of needing to find work for survival or family raising. These characters portray a unique in-between world of not-child/not-adult.

As noted above, the industrial age helped us identify a late stage childhood/pre-adulthood we termed adolescence. This “no longer child/not yet adult” state became a social crisis that had various means of attention throughout the 20th and into the 21st century. The solution, regardless of expression, seemed to fall under the umbrella of keeping adolescents separate and active. Educational opportunities continued to expand from compulsory high school to most high school graduates seeking an undergraduate degree. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1940, only 1 in 20 Americans had their bachelor's degree. In 2000, that number rose to 1 in 4.<sup>104</sup> This means that certain criteria we associate with adulthood such as marriage or “moving out”, starting a career, etc are now being delayed by a large percentage of Americans. In addition, the percentage of young adults who continue to live at home has risen sharply to 32% of adults from the ages of 18-32.<sup>105</sup> Delayed long-term romantic coupling and a limited job market were cited as causes for this shift. What I see as the primary concern on both a sociological level and an ecclesiastical level is that we have a “lost” period where adolescents are not being well transitioned into the greater society and continue their cultural isolation as

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> "Education - U.S. Census Bureau," accessed 14 Mar. 2017, [https://www.census.gov/population/www/cen2000/censusatlas/pdf/10\\_Education.pdf](https://www.census.gov/population/www/cen2000/censusatlas/pdf/10_Education.pdf).

<sup>105</sup> "For First Time in Modern Era, Living With ...." 24 May. 2016, accessed 14 Mar. 2017, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2016/05/24/for-first-time-in-modern-era-living-with-parents-edges-out-other-living-arrangements-for-18-to-34-year-olds/>.

noted in the chapter on adolescents. If coupling and childhood are cited as factors for a return to church, that is now being delayed well into a person's 30s if not later. This gives us a desperate time loss in the lives of many of the people we spent so much time and resources to form.<sup>106</sup>

The extension of adolescence is another modern invention similar to the creation of adolescence itself. Historically, adulthood and the accompanying rites of passage began in the early teen years. Most cultures treated the transition from childhood to adulthood around the time of puberty when children took on greater familial roles and began to form families of their own. Religious traditions followed along with community standards of childhood and adulthood, setting ages for spiritual accountability, religious practice, and community responsibility. In the Christian tradition, the process of confirmation begins around 12 or 13 years of age and is completed after a period of catechesis and celebrated with a ceremony that welcomes the confirmands into full members of the Christian church. The rite given affirms the early baptism of the child and confers on them the gifts of the Holy Spirit that equip them for membership in the church. Similarly, the Jewish tradition of Bar Mitzvah (for boys at 13) and Bat Mitzvah (for girls at 12), is an emergence of children into the community of faith and the responsibilities associated with belonging. Bar and Bat simply mean son or daughter followed by Mitzvah or "commandment". This rite is not a graduation, but a taking on of the responsibilities of being a son or daughter of the Jewish law and traditions.

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<sup>106</sup> The work of Arnett is a particularly helpful work to further explore the extension of adolescence in what Arnett is calling "emerging adulthood." Jeffery Jensen Arnett *Debating Emerging Adulthood: Stage or Process?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) explores this period of transitioning that challenges Erickson's (1950) accepted lifespan theory. This new stage of adult development suggests that continuing a model of youth ministry based on outdated developmental theory will continue the attrition trends outlined above.

This is true outside of Jewish and Christian culture as well. In the Baha'i culture it's "...turning 15 that's the biggest deal. It's considered the age of spiritual maturity. If you're 15, you are no longer going to be participating in a Junior Youth Group. You'll be participating in a Ruhi Baha'i study circle, perhaps with the intention of becoming a Junior Youth Group animator."<sup>107</sup> In the Baha'i example, students are given greater and greater responsibility in the Baha'i community. It can be assumed that this would have been the intent of the cultural markers we find in Judaism and Christianity, however, in their western expressions, it has become, in many cases, a ceremony without the accompanying responsibilities. The post-confirmation reality seldom follows the rite's intent and young people are not invited into an intergenerational experience of growing responsibility. Older adults and church leadership mourn the absence of millennials, but then must question the avenues of transitioning that we practice. The experience of adolescence in the church is like sailing a ship when it was believed the world was flat. Children are launched on a sea that eventually just ends.

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<sup>107</sup> "On a Bigger Deal Than Turning 21: Turning 15: Baha'i Views," 7 Mar. 2011, accessed 14 Mar. 2017, <http://www.bahaiviews.net/2011/03/07/on-a-bigger-deal-than-turning-21-turning-15/>. Accessed 14 Mar. 2017.

## CHAPTER 6

### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

#### **Summary**

Beginning this project, I had serious questions about the state of not only my profession, but the viability of the Christian church itself. Richard Dawkins, in a 2013 interview remarked that the developed world is “moving in the right direction. Christianity is dying, and good riddance.”<sup>108</sup> Is this movement, this faith that I have given the entirety of my adult life to, a thing of our primitive past? Was it time to learn a new trade? Digging for the answers to explain a dying church has far more than professional implications for someone who has been in active engagement with a religion for over 45 years. It brought me a great deal of joy, and relief to find the work of Dr. Nel who sparked a flame of hope that we may have simply been thinking about youth ministry the wrong way.

Mainline church attrition is a glaring reality and regardless of the creative and determined minds that have attempted to tackle the question, all that is ever accomplished is a slowing of attrition, but never a moment where the tide is turned. I personally followed the conventional wisdom of my Caucasian, suburban cultural context that a

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<sup>108</sup> "Video: Christianity is dying, and good riddance, says Richard Dawkins ...." 1 May. 2013, accessed 21 Mar. 2017, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/technology/technology-video/video-christianity-is-dying-and-good-riddance-says-richard-dawkins/article11652512/>.

highly skilled youth worker and an engaging and creative youth program was the key to patch the proverbial hole in the boat, but found myself in the same sinking ship. The church from which I grew has been doing a particular brand of youth ministry for over 75 years. This style was hip, relevant, and promised to be the answer to win a generation for Christ. Teenagers were welcomed into youth rooms, camps, and concert halls, with fun and relevant programming designed just for them. While we celebrated our successful ministries, they would exit by the back door with fond memories, never to return.

Following modern learning theory and sociological practice seemed like wisdom, yet we did not take the time to ask ourselves if we shared the same goals as the surrounding culture. Christianity has always been in dialog with the culture in which it resides, but if the cultural values are adopted without criticism, the church becomes complicit in processes of human development and societal construction that are decidedly “un”-Christian. As we look again to Mercer’s critique of a consumerist society, we see a way of life structured by and around various practices of consumption and accumulation.<sup>109</sup> All of life is reduced to the wisdom of the bumper sticker that says “He who dies with the most toys wins.” Our educational system and developmental processes are designed to ready children for productive work that makes a “good living” and a comfortable retirement. In the context of the communities that are predominantly white and economically affluent, individualism becomes the overriding characteristic of the family structure and church involvement is weighed largely on personal value. Economic comfort does not require the communal survival seen in communities such as the historically Black church, but with economic success, there is lost the theological wisdom

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<sup>109</sup> Mercer, *Welcoming Children*.

of the church as community of “others.”

Clues have been found outside the dominant U.S. culture as we recognize that people groups who successfully maintain the sense of “kinship” tend to have far greater success in passing the faith down to generations. In these communities, there is a sense of family and “us-ness” that holds generational faith, even if there are changes in the expression of that faith. The findings of this project show that it is far less about the theology or the modernity of the worship experience, but the creation and nurture of an intergenerational family where young and old have a sense of belonging and purpose.

### **Church as “Tribe” Instead of Institution of Religious Learning**

Since its publication in the early 2000s, the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) driven by sociologist Christian Smith has opened the eyes of the American church to the relationship of youth to their church of origin and the personal beliefs that they hold. Like many youth practitioners, I was not surprised by the research telling us that the beliefs of teenagers tend to change over time, that they are not emerging from ministry with the beliefs of their family or church of origin, or that they are disappearing. It is a reality that youth workers face every day. However, there is a tacit perspective in the NSYR that is important to note and that is the focus on beliefs and behavior but not belonging. Christian Smith does note, however, that many of the teens who are experiencing positive outcomes are experiencing healthy socialization in two spheres: individual family households and multigenerational religious congregations.<sup>110</sup>

In my own survey of 138 people who had grown up in a church, the

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<sup>110</sup> C. Smith and P. Snell *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 286.

overwhelming amount of people who stayed indicated that they did so because they felt connected (43%), with the next highest number citing specifically spiritual reasons (only 25%). Yet, the majority of the work we do in youth groups has to do with belief and behavior when the indicating factor of retention is a feeling of belonging.

Carol Howard Merritt has called this experience “Tribal Church”. For Merritt, a tribe is a “subculture of people who care for each other in the most basic ways.”<sup>111</sup> Merritt has identified the need of the under forty population as being in need of a community that recognizes the unique needs of the younger generation (need for supportive friends, limited resources, etc.) while uniting the gathering in connection to God.<sup>112</sup> She skillfully articulates the need for inclusion, understanding, traditions, and spiritual nurture. While Merritt’s book is largely a model for reaching the younger generation, I believe her understanding of church as a caring subculture is a key to unlock a new perspective of church as an intergenerational community united in the love and forgiveness found in the Christian message. This is a departure from the cognitive model or behavioral models practiced in most churches today. This changes the church from an institution of religious education to the “corpus” of Christ.

### **Intergenerational Ministry**

One of the most comprehensive works on the subject of intergenerational ministry in a U.S. context is Allen and Ross’ work “*Intergenerational Christian Formation*”. For a working definition of intergenerational ministry, they cite James White’s foundational

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<sup>111</sup> Carol Howard Merritt, *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007) 8.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.



definition as “two or more different age groups of people in a religious community together learning/growing/living in faith through in-common experiences, parallel learning, contributive-occasions, and interactive sharing.”<sup>113</sup> Allen and Ross break the definition down into three components: *intergenerational outlook, intergenerational ministry, and intergenerational experiences*.<sup>114</sup> Intergenerational outlook is the perspective that congregations recognize that the gifts needed to strengthen and grow the whole church are spread across the generations. Intergenerational ministry, using Allen and Ross’ definition, are practices that employ these gifts in worship and service all together on a regular basis. Intergenerational experiences are simply activities done with multiple representatives of two or more generations.<sup>115</sup>

In other words, churches practicing intergenerational faith formation recognize that they are not a fully equipped church in an age-segregated situation and there is a need for everyone to bring their gifts together in worship and in service. In this church, youth ministry is not practiced in a location separate from the rest of the congregation, but it is a ministry of integration that helps adolescents develop their unique gifting in a supportive environment that recognizes the vital nature of youth for more than merely their youth, but for the contribution their gifting plays as an equal part of the corpus.

### **Generational Tension**

The question of generational dissonance is almost certain to be raised at the

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<sup>113</sup> James White, *Intergenerational Christian Education: Models, Theory, and Prescription for Intergenerational Life and Learning in the Faith Community* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1988).

<sup>114</sup> Holly Allen and Christine Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012).

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

suggestion of including the young into the greater work of a local church. The older generation might fear beloved traditions and beliefs being lost in exchange for something louder and foreign to their established practice of faith while the young fear the rejection of their values and culture, choosing distance instead of belonging. Here, it is again helpful to look to scholarship from the Global South. Anita L. Cloete provides a great contribution to the challenge of generational dissonance. Cloete suggests that we should not release the tension, “but rather to keep it intact and let it work for something greater and better than the current reality”<sup>116</sup> For Cloete, tension leads to creativity in ministry that is vital to the health and growth of the congregation. Age-specific ministry gives the impression of relevance and it is clearly easier to create a ministry without the generational tension, but the reality of our congregation is that the tension is there, but we are simply not dealing with it and are paying a steep price. Cloete contends that for the creative tension to be effective all generations are taken seriously and there are opportunities to participate in ministry while diversity is engaged and appreciated.<sup>117</sup> This does not negate age-specific opportunities for Cloete as it does not for Nel. Cloete suggests that there should be some distinct opportunities for youth to come away as youth to consider the unique ways that they are engaging with theology and congregational life. In that way, youth find their own voice and develop a faith they can take with them outside of the congregational context. In this way, youth develop independence, but not isolation.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Anita Louisa Cloete, "Creative Tensions in Youth Ministry in a Congregational Context," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 71, no. 2 (2015): 1-7.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

## Challenges in a U.S. Context to an Intergenerational Approach

The factors that led to the adoption of age-segregated ministry are still present in American culture and will present a challenge to the adoption of an inclusive congregational approach. As noted above, the industrial revolution began a process of systematically isolating age groups and creating age-based cultures with each requiring unique attentions. Legislation requiring education took children from the family home well into their teen years and retirement ages moved people into pensions around 65, leaving the workplace inhabited by the middle age. Economic trends require more and more children to be in daycare at a young age so that the time separated from adults is growing and children spend most of their day with a narrow band of peers.<sup>119</sup> Even the concept of the nuclear family, driven by the ability of a small unit of a larger kinship to survive economically, is unique to the modern age changing the family structure from a consanguineous form with multiple generations of “kin” to a conjugal one with only two sets of similar age adults and however many children reside in the home.

A notable theological result of white suburban American culture has been a shift of soteriological efficacy from the communal aspect of salvation to individual relationship with God.<sup>120</sup> The phrase “accepting Jesus as my personal savior” is a common tool of evangelistic efforts yet betrays a disconnection with the community from the origin of conversion and is a uniquely American concept. This is not to suggest a theology of salvation from the church as agent, but salvation with the church as the kinship of God.

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<sup>119</sup> Gunhild Hagestad and Peter Uhlenberg, “The Social Separation of Old and Young: The Root of Agism.” *The Journal of Social Issues* 61, no. 2 (2005): 345-360.

<sup>120</sup> Allen and Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 38.

Churches often celebrate being multi-generational, but this means that they have only created individualized programs to fit the needs of unique groups within the church. Youth can enjoy a more rowdy and technological atmosphere with tools geared toward the younger generation and thus the older folks don't have to adjust their fondness for how they understand worship. Couple that with the American evangelical emphasis of accepting Christ as your *personal* savior and you get a church with "little social capital to draw on in our churches as we try to encourage people to stay in community and grow together as brothers and sisters in Christ."<sup>121</sup> For intergenerational practice to work, there needs to be a greater commitment to the sense of belonging within the church as a theological reality as expressed in Ephesians 4:11-16:

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.<sup>122</sup>

Though often quoted, this passage is seldom used to include all generations, only a sense of gift diversity. However, the passage does seem to indicate that Christian maturity is a corporate experience that requires the full representation of the entire corpus of Christ.

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<sup>121</sup> Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Community* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2009), 143.

<sup>122</sup> Ephesians 4:11-16 (NRSV).

### **Findings require a deeper look**

While little qualitative research has been done in the U.S. on the value of intergenerational ministry, in the last decade there has been more and more study on the subject and the findings call for further research. Prior to 2006, very little work had been done on the subject of intergenerationality. James White's 1988 text *Intergenerational Religious Education* has been a foundational work for most intergenerational studies, and for two decades after, most of the research had to do with whether what was offered was liked or not, instead of empirical research evaluating impact.<sup>123</sup> Harkness and Nel focus on the theological foundation of intergenerational ministry and there has been work done on intergenerational programs such as family-based ministry. In the last decade there has been great work done on rethinking youth ministry on a teleological level, thus having a significant impact on praxis. Leading voices such as Ross and Allen have produced well-researched work that draws from across disciplines to support a foundational change in ecclesiastical practice, but even they end their comprehensive work on intergenerational Christian formation with a call for further studies. I look forward to the coming decade as the church recognizes that the steep decline in our congregations will not be turned around by a new program or tactic, but by teaching our congregations that we are a community of faith, an inclusive tribe that cares for the needs of our diverse membership gathered in the love of God.

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<sup>123</sup> White, *Intergenerational Religious Education*.

## AFTERWORD

### SO, DO I STILL HAVE A JOB?

As I write, I cannot help but ask the question of what happens to a youth pastor in a congregation that embraces intergenerationality? I can picture lines of people with guitars, goatees, and unused water balloons outside the unemployment office because we no longer need staff to run youth programming. Underneath all of the research done for this project, that question loomed like a shadow in the corner questioning 30 years of work. However, in my research, I saw a need more than ever for practitioners who could have one foot in the world of teens, one foot in the world of adults, and a keen theological outlook. April Diaz' book, *Redefining the Role of Youth Worker*, suggests that the youth worker's role is one of youth integration instead of youth programming. Her job description of the "Student Integration Pastor" included:

- Thinking about initiatives, not programs
- Finding meaningful places for adolescent involvement in the overall church
- Creating specialized experiences for community and learning that is formation-forward, theologically sound, developmentally specific.
- Altering the 5:1 ratio so that instead of one adult ministering to every 5 kids, there were 5 adults identified as primary influencers in the lives of every teen in the

church.<sup>124</sup>

Ultimately, the question surrounding the role of professional youth worker is not around the legitimacy of the role, but what is the foundational purpose in the role and its accompanying praxis. Through the lens of this project, I see the role of professional youth worker as mediator, translator, and developer of opportunities to help the congregation develop an inclusive congregational ministry. Drawing from the research, I've developed a suggested job description of a church youth worker who is focused on faith formation across generations. I suggest an intergenerational youth worker must:

- Develop avenues of participation and integration for adolescents in every church ministry and congregational worship.
- Support family life and home spiritual formation.
- Connect teenagers with congregational mentors who can, through storytelling and participation, understand the broader vision of the church, history of the church, and how they might fit.
- Train and equip older members of the congregation to participate in the faith formation of the young.
- Plan events and experiences designed to foster socialization across generations.
- Plan age-specific opportunities during the calendar year to help teens crystalize their own faith perspectives and learn how to articulate their faith.
- Keep the theology of growth together and family support as a vibrant component of the congregational self-identity.
- Work the 5:1 ratio with every teen in your church to insure that each teen is

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<sup>124</sup> April Diaz, *Redefining the Role of Youth Worker: A Manifesto of Integration* (San Diego, CA: Youth Cartel, 2013) 36.

surrounded with the love and care they need to feel connected over the long term. It can be argued if the job description above is more challenging or less challenging than the present youth worker job description, but my impression is that by sharing the load, youth workers will be far more effective and last far longer, long enough to see our kids stay.

Long-term growth will always come as a result of inclusivity. As a teenager, I attended a summer camp that ended with a big bonfire. As we were all gathered around the fire, the camp preacher picked up a long stick from the ground and dug out one of the burning embers from the middle of the fire. The coal burned bright on the ground, a clear beacon against the dark earth. But then it grew dimmer, and continued to until it was finally out. “We all have this idea that we can go it alone,” the preacher said., “but like this ember, we need each other to continue burning.”

The point the preacher was trying to make was that we needed to be regular churchgoers to keep our faith alive and not “backslide”, but in terms of this thesis, the point is well taken. The church grows best when the church grows together. Differentiation is a fact of growth and development, and is inescapable. We do not need to foster what will happen naturally. Generational isolation, regardless of the quality of the programming, has ensured disconnection and attrition. However, if we begin with unity, the differentiation process will happen naturally, yet we will have instilled in our children who we are as the corpus of Christ.



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## Appendix

Fig. 1

### Biggest Declines Seen Among Mainline Protestants

	Among all U.S. adults			Among Protestants		
	2007	2014	Change	2007	2014	Change
	%	%		%	%	
Evangelical tradition	26.3	25.4	-0.9	51	55	+4
Mainline tradition	18.1	14.7	-3.4	35	32	-3
Historically black Protestant tradition	6.9	6.5	-0.4	13	14	+1
<b>NET Protestants</b>	<b>=51.3%</b>	<b>=46.5%</b>	<b>-4.7</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	

2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014. Figures may not add to 100% due to rounding.

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Fig. 2

### World Distribution of Christian Population

This "weighted" map of the world shows each country's relative size based on its Christian population. Figures are rounded to the nearest million.

